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Vancouver Art Gallery Exhibition Provides Intimate Look into the World of Georgia O’Keeffe

Media Preview Wednesday, October 4th at 9AM

“Abstraction is often the most definite form for the intangible thing in myself ... I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn’t say any other way—things I had no words for.”

—Georgia O’Keeffe, Artist Statement (1923)

VANCOUVER, BC — The **Vancouver Art Gallery** will present a sweeping retrospective of paintings by legendary Modernist Georgia O’Keeffe from **October 6, 2007 to January 13, 2008**. ***Georgia O’Keeffe: Nature and Abstraction*** is the second solo exhibition of O’Keeffe’s work presented in Canada and the first in 50 years. Comprising a stunning collection of 28 canvases spanning the artist’s entire career, the exhibition is punctuated by an important selection of photographs of O’Keeffe as a young woman taken by husband and fellow artist, Alfred Stieglitz, and of the artist later in life captured by renowned American photographer Todd Webb. Guest curated by Richard D. Marshall, former curator at the Whitney Museum of Art, the exhibition is the product of an innovative collaboration between the Vancouver Art Gallery and Irish Museum of Modern Art.



Georgia O’Keeffe, *Series 1, No. 4*, 1918, oil on canvas, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich, Gift of Georgia O’Keeffe Foundation, 1955 © Georgia O’Keeffe Museum / Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus / SODRAC (2007)

“As home to the most important collection of canvases by Emily Carr, Canada’s great Modernist painter, the Vancouver Art Gallery is the ideal venue to showcase the work of her legendary American counterpart, Georgia O’Keeffe, in the first solo exhibition of her work in Western Canada,” said Gallery director Kathleen Bartels. “By bringing together exemplary works by O’Keeffe from throughout her long career and images of the artist taken by those that loved her, the exhibition provides an intimate encounter with one of America’s greatest painters.”

Presenting O’Keeffe’s iconic landscapes and nature studies, the exhibition illuminates the dominant aspect of her artistic achievement and inspiration—the transformation of nature into abstraction. This selection of key works, brought together from major collections throughout the United States and Europe, demonstrates the artist’s determination to re-interpret the world by expressing its essential elements of form and colour. A comprehensive survey of her career, the exhibition includes O’Keeffe’s highly abstract early works inspired by music, key paintings from her time in upstate New York, as well as a large selection of important paintings from the most iconic and enduring portion of her career in New Mexico, including one of her largest canvases *Black Door with Red* (1954) measuring more than two-metres in length.

Although aligned with major figures of twentieth century Modernism, Georgia O’Keeffe (1887-1986) is renowned for her unique vision of the world and steadfast dedication to her own distinct voice. At the beginning of her career in 1915 the artist wrote, “I had been taught to work like others and after careful thinking I decided that I wasn’t going to spend my life doing what had already been done...I decided to start anew—to strip away what I had been taught—to accept as true my own thinking.”

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After discovering a passion for art as a student in Wisconsin, O’Keeffe enrolled in the Art Institute of Chicago in 1905. She continued her studies at the Arts Student League in New York City, where she made regular visits to the now mythical Gallery 291. Owned by her future husband, Alfred Stieglitz, the gallery gave O’Keeffe her first experiences with such European avant-garde painters as Paul Cezanne, George Braque and Pablo Picasso and, in 1917, presented the young artist in her first major solo exhibition. During the following decade, O’Keeffe lived in New York City and spent summers at the Stieglitz family home in Lake George, New York where she began painting her iconic close-up views of flowers.

Impressed by the stark beauty of New Mexico on a summer vacation in 1917, O’Keeffe returned to the state in 1934 on a trip to Ghost Ranch, a dude ranch she later bought in 1940. Although she continued to travel and paint in other locations, the cliffs, hills and trees that surround her New Mexico desert home became her central inspiration for the next 35 years. Throughout this time, O’Keeffe was the focus of increasingly prestigious exhibitions, including solo shows at the Brooklyn Museum (1927), the Art Institute of Chicago (1943), and New York’s Museum of Modern Art (1946), where she was the first woman to be featured in a retrospective.

Although Georgia O’Keeffe was a subject for many photographers in her lifetime, the two most prominent are Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) and Todd Webb (1905-2000). Throughout his life Stieglitz was many things to O’Keeffe, including art dealer, chief promotional advocate and husband. Together they were often referred to as “the founding couple of American art.” Credited as a central force in the creation of photography as a legitimate art form, Stieglitz continuously used O’Keeffe as a muse for his images. The photographs included in the exhibition reflect his fascination with the artist and the intensity of their relationship, especially during their early years together. Many of the photographs are theatrically posed and highly constructed, depicting O’Keeffe as a heroic figure against a dramatic sky, or focusing on close-ups of particular body parts.

After Stieglitz’s death in 1946, Webb developed a close relationship with O’Keeffe and documented the artist frequently until 1981. In the 1950s, with the help of two Guggenheim fellowships, he created a portfolio of images of the American West, making numerous trips to see O’Keeffe in New Mexico. With encouragement from O’Keeffe, Webb and his wife moved to New Mexico in 1961. During the decade they lived near the artist, the photographer created a large volume of work featuring the painter in her studio, at her Ghost Ranch home and in the Southwest landscape that gave her inspiration, many of which are featured in the exhibition.

Georgia O’Keeffe: Nature and Abstraction is accompanied by a fully illustrated book co-published by Skira, the Irish Museum of Modern Art and the Vancouver Art Gallery, with essays by Yvonne Scott and Achille Bonito Oliva and the curator, Richard D. Marshall. The exhibition is co-organized by the Irish Museum of Modern Art and the Vancouver Art Gallery, and curated by Richard D. Marshall. Additional works were organized by Vancouver Art Gallery senior curator, Ian Thom.